Approved for Release: 2018/10/01 C01442185

Raúl Ricardo ALFONSIN Foulkes — ARGENTINA

(Phonetic: ahlfohnSEEN)

©

President
(since December 1983)

Addressed as:
Mr. President

A man of deep political convictions and a human rights activist, Raúl Alfonsín is attempting to reestablish democratic government in Argentina after an almost unbroken 40-year string of military and Peronist governments. He is the first democratically oriented president in almost 70 years to exercise genuine political control. He is popular with the people, who admire his honesty, moral leadership qualities, and political savvy, according to US Embassy officials. He is, however, besieged by militant labor unions demanding wage increases, an antagonist opposition party, and mounting social unrest created by Argentina's economic difficulties. As a result he has lost the initial momentum generated by his sweeping reform actions aimed at placing the military under civilian control and democratizing labor union leadership. The above-mentioned officials add that, although Alfonsín is the undisputed leader of the government and of his Radical Civic Union (UCR) party, his administration lacks a coherent program and managerial expertise. 3.5(c)

Alfonsín combines pragmatism with strong moral principles, say US diplomats. They note that his governing style is to maintain equilibrium among opposing forces, delay making decisions that cause division, and build consensus when possible. At the same time he has demonstrated administrative weaknesses such as poor planning, and he has failed to delegate authority and to capitalize on opportunities to implement his programs. His attempts to handle problems on a day-by-day basis have resulted in inconsistent and counterproductive decisions, report these same officials. 3.5(c)

Domestic Politics

After his inauguration, Alfonsín moved quickly to fulfill his campaign promises and to confront the wide range of problems inherited from the previous military government. He appointed a blue-ribbon commission to investigate the disappearances of about 7,000 people during the military's anti-insurgency campaign in the late 1970s. He also ordered the court-martialing (on charges of murder, torture, and kidnaping) of nine members of military juntas that ruled between 1976 and 1982. On the labor front he proposed democratic elections in the trade unions—a move designed to break the Peronist grip on union leadership. After the Peronist-dominated Senate defeated his labor union reform proposal in March 1984, Alfonsín took a less confrontational approach toward his political opposition, and he himself engaged in negotiations with labor leaders. He has also advocated the creation of a "social pact" that would be backed by all major political parties, report US diplomats. 3.5(c)

Foreign Policy

Alfonsín has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy based on the principles of nonalignment and Latin American integration. Increased trade relations with Cuba and

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Nicaragua have been balanced by efforts to improve ties to the United States. Moreover, while acknowledging the legitimacy of Argentina's foreign debt, he has rejected what he calls the orthodox mechanisms prescribed by the International Monetary Fund for handling repayment, and he has assumed the leadership role among Latin American governments in the quest for better terms. He has adamantly upheld Argentine claims to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands; at the same time, Argentine negotiations with Chile over the disputed Beagle Channel are apparently close to an agreement. 3.5(c)

Career and Personal Data

Alfonsín has a doctorate in law and social sciences from the University of Buenos Aires. He has held positions in the UCR since the 1950s. He has served two terms in the Buenos Aires provincial Chamber of Deputies, and during the early 1960s he represented Buenos Aires Province in the national Chamber of Deputies, where he was vice president of the UCR bloc. Alfonsín was the UCR candidate for governor of Buenos Aires Province in 1967, before the then ruling military canceled the election. 3.5(c)

Embassy officers report that Alfonsín acquired an image as a populist and a reform-minded democrat in the late 1960s, when he published antigovernment editorials in the UCR monthly and was arrested for participating in an illegal street demonstration. In the early 1970s he was the heir apparent to then UCR leader Ricardo Balbín, but he became dissatisfied with Balbín's conservative, accommodating position on military rule, according to Embassy officials. Convinced that the UCR needed to take on a more populist character, Alfonsín founded the Renovation and Change faction in the UCR in 1972 to move the party leftward to challenge the Peronists and to take advantage of widespread public discontent with the military government. For the next decade he fought tenaciously for the party leadership, championing human rights causes and helping to found the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights. He traveled to Europe in 1980 to win the support of socialists and established ties to several European leaders, including French President François Mitterrand and Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González. In the year preceding the presidential election, he organized massive political rallies; backed human rights marches; and, as an attorney, defended numerous political detainees. He assured his dominance in the UCR when his Renovation and Change faction won absolute control of the party's National Committee in internal party elections in July 1983. 3.5(c)

A lifelong sports enthusiast, Alfonsín, 57, enjoys playing paleta, a form of racquetball. He also enjoys reading Spanish literature. Married to the former María Lorenza Barreneche, he has six children and 13 grandchildren. One daughter lives in Oklahoma. 3.5(c)

1 August 1984

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